

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

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TAGS: ELAB, FJ

SUBJECT: FIJ TRIPARTITIE TALKS SUCCESSFUL

1. TALKS WHICH BEGAN IN 1976 BETWEEN THE FIJI GOVERNMENT, FIJI EMPLOYERS' CONSULTATIVE ASSOCIATION AND THE FIJI TRADES UNION CONGRESS HAVE CULMINATED IN AN AGREEMENT ON WAGE GUIDELINES WHICH HAS SET A 10 PERCENT CEILING ON PAY RAISES FOR THE NEXT 12 MONTHS. THE AGREEMENT, ANNOUNCED ON MAY 11, ALSO PROVIDED FOR THE CREATION OF TWO IMPORTANT COMMITTEES. ONE WOULD HAVE THE PRIME MINISTER AS CHAIRMAN, WITH TWO REPRESENTATIVES

EACH FROM THE EMPLOYERS AND WORKERS. IT WOULD TRY TO PREVENT DISPUTES FROM ESCALATING INTO STRIKE SITUATIONS, BY TALKING WITH AND PUTTING PRESSURE ON RECALCITRANT UNIONS AND EMPLOYERS. THE SECOND COMMITTEE WILL BE COMPRISED OF TWO GOVERNMENT OFFICERS, WHO WILL ADJUDICATE CLAIMS BY EMPLOYERS WHO PLEAD INABILITY TO PAY WAGE RAISE REQUESTS. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THESE TWO COMMITTEES WILL SUPPLEMENT THE EXISTING ARBITRATION MACHINERY PROVIDED FOR IN THE TRADE DISPUTES ACT.

2. JAMES RAMAN, THE GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE FTUC, REPRESENTED LABOR IN THE NEGOTIATIONS. THE FTUC REPRESENTS 28 AFFILIATED UNIONS, WITH A COMBINED MEMBERSHIP OF OVER 31,000, INCLUDING ALL UNCLASSIFIED

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OF THE MOST POWERFUL UNIONS IN THE COUNTRY EXCEPT THE FIJI SUGAR AND GENERAL WORKERS UNION, WHICH IS AFFILIATED WITH THE RIVAL FIJI COUNCIL OF TRADE UNIONS. IT WAS THE FTUC WHICH PROMOTED THE IDEA OF TRIPARTISM IN A RESOLUTION ADOPTED AT ITS ANNUAL CONVENTION IN 1975, WHICH WAS SUBMITTED TO THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE TIME. THE RESOLUTION INDICATED THAT THE LABOR MOVEMENT WOULD BE PREPARED TO LAUNCH "A FIJI NATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A

TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND THE SPREAD OF SOCIAL JUSTICE". THE GOVERNMENT DID NOT ACT UPON THIS INITIATIVE UNTIL NEARLY A YEAR LATER, WHEN THE FIRST MEETINGS WERE HELD IN DECEMBER 1976.

3. DESPITE RAMAN'S FULL SUPPORT OF THE AGREEMENT, TWO AFFILIATED FTUC UNIONS HAVE STATED THEY WILL NOT BE BOUND BY THE 10 PERCENT CEILING. THE LEADERS OF THE FIJI OIL AND ALLIED WORKERS UNION AND THE FIJI WATERSIDE WORKER'S AND SEAMEN'S UNION HAVE REFUSED TO FOLLOW RAMAN'S LEAD. RAMAN HAS URGED ALL WORKERS TO STOP ACTING IN A "DOG-MINDED" FASHION AND ACCEPT VOLUNTARY LIMITS ON PAY RAISES IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST. THE WATERSIDE WORKERS (DOCKWORKERS) ARE CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN WAGE NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE PORTS AUTHORITY OF FIJI, AND HAS THREATENED A WALKOUT TO CLOSE DOWN THE PORTS IF THEIR DEMANDS ARE NOT MET. AT ISSUE ALSO IS THE VERY LARGE EGO OF DOCKWORKERS NEGOTIATOR TANIELA VEITATA, WHO MANAGED TO FORCE THE CLOSURE IN APRIL OF ONE OF FIJI'S LARGEST BISCUIT MANUFACTURING COMPANIES. THE PORTS AUTHORITY REPRESENTATIVES HAVE REFUSED TO ACCEPT VEITATA AS A NEGOTIATOR ON THE LABOR SIDE BECAUSE OF HIS CRIMINAL RECORD -- HE WAS CONVICTED AND JAILED FOR THEFT ON THE DOCKS.

THERE IS A PROVISION IN THE TRADE DISPUTES ACT THAT ANYONE CONVICTED OF A CRIME AND JAILED WITHIN THE PAST FIVE YEARS CANNOT REPRESENT A LABOR UNION, HOWEVER VEITATA HAS PREVIOUSLY ACTED ON THE UNION'S BEHALF WITHOUT QUESTIONS BEING RAISED BY THE GOVERNMENT OR EMPLOYERS. IT IS DOUBTFUL WHETHER VEITATA WILL WANT HIS NEGOTIATING POSITION CIRCUMSCRIBED AT THIS TIME BY THE 10 PERCENT CEILING.

4. THE FCTU, HEADED BY LEFTIST MP APISAI TORA, ALSO HAS REFUSED
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TO BE BOUND BY THE AGREEMENT. TORA HAS TOLD REPORTERS HE WAS SURPRISED AND AMAZED BY THE AGREEMENT, SINCE SOME COMPANIES IN FIJI HAD RECORDED SUBSTANTIAL PROFITS LAST YEAR, AND FELT THE 10 PERCENT CEILING HAD NO BASIS IN FACT. TORA HAS NOW CLOSED SEVERAL OF FIJI'S SUGAR MILLS AT THE START OF THE CRUSHING SEASON OVER A WAGE DISPUTE BY THE SUGAR AND GENERAL WORKERS UNION, OF WHICH HE IS SECRETARY. TORA IS ASKING A WAGE INCREASE FROM 97 CENTS TO \$1.20, FAR ABOVE THE TEN PERCENT GUIDELINES.

5. DESPITE THE FALLOUT BY THE TWO FTUC MEMBERS AND NONAGREEMENT BY THE FCTU, TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT IS STILL A MAJOR MILESTONE IN FIJI'S LABOR RELATIONS HISTORY. RAMAN'S MODERATE STANCE AND HIS RECOGNITION THAT THE LABOR MOVEMENT STANDS TO GAIN MORE FROM INCREASED EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC STABILITY HAS HELPED CONSIDERABLY TO EASE TENSIONS THAT HAVE EXISTED FOR A LONG TIME IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN FIJI.
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